

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *The Tender Bar: A Memoir*

Author: J.R. Moehringer

Born December 7, 1964, in New York, NY.
Education: Yale University, B.A., 1986.
Addresses: Office: Los Angeles Times,
National Bureau, Denver, 202 W. 1st St.,
Los Angeles, CA 90012.

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Education: Attended
Yale University, B.A.,
1986

Addresses: Office:
Los Angeles Times,
National Bureau,
Denver, 202 W.
1st St., Los Angeles,
CA 90012

E-mail: ?



Career:

Journalist and writer. *New York Times*, New York, NY, news assistant, 1986-90; *Rocky Mountain News*, Denver, CO, reporter, 1990-94; *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles, CA, reporter, 1994-97, Atlanta bureau chief, 1997-.

Awards:

Niemann fellow to Harvard University; Livingston Award for Young Journalists, 1997; feature writing award, Associated Press News Executives Council, 1997; Pulitzer Prize for feature writing, finalist, 1998, winner, 2000.

Writings:

The Tender Bar: A Memoir, Hyperion (New York, NY), 2005.



Author: J.R. Moehringer (2)

Sidelights:

American journalist J.R. Moehringer has written for newspapers across the United States, including the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Rocky Mountain News*. His work has won numerous awards, including the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing.

In 2005, Moehringer published his first book, *The Tender Bar: A Memoir*. The story recounts the author's childhood and early adulthood growing up in Manhasset, New York, where he lived with his single mother in his grandfather's house. As a boy, eagerly searching for a father figure, Moehringer accompanies his bartender uncle to the local town bar. There he meets a cast of characters—Bob the Cop, Cager, Stinky, Colt, Smelly, Jimbo, Fast Eddy, and Bobo—who take him under their wing and adopt him into their family of sorts. The memoir follows Moehringer into college at Yale University and through unsuccessful romantic relationships as well as the beginning of his career as a journalist.

Overall, critics lauded Moehringer's work in *The Tender Bar*. Many found the book to be a strong addition to the coming-of-age genre, one that carries with it a range of emotions for readers. The book is "a straight-up account of masculinity, maturity and memory that leaves a smile on the face and an ache in the heart," wrote a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor. Others found the memoir to be full of entertaining anecdotes that make for an engrossing read. "Moehringer has hours and hours of stories that any bar hound worth his stool would bend both ears to drink in," observed Gregory Kirschling in a review for *Entertainment Weekly*.



Author: J.R. Moehringer (3)

Further Readings:

Books:

Moehringer, J.R., *The Tender Bar: A Memoir*, Hyperion (New York, NY), 2005.

Periodicals:

Denver Post, July 24, 2005, Bill Husted, review of *The Tender Bar*.

Entertainment Weekly, September 2, 2005, Gregory Kirschling, review of *The Tender Bar*, p. 82.

Kirkus Reviews, July 15, 2005, review of *The Tender Bar*, p. 779.

Publishers Weekly, June 27, 2005, review of *The Tender Bar*, p. 50

Online:

Pulitzer Prize Web site, <http://www.pulitzer.org/> (September 20, 2005), biography of J.R. Moehringer.*

Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Source Database: Contemporary Authors Online



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Reviews:

The Tender Bar. Chris Jones.

Esquire 144.6 (Dec 2005): p80(1).

The Tender Bar (Hyperion, \$24), by J. R. Moehringer. When I was just starting out, I had the misfortune of reading a magazine article by Moehringer called "Resurrecting the Champ." It was a boxing story, but it was also a story about fathers, and, more than that, it was the most perfect story I could ever imagine. It made me want to quit writing. Now, with *The Tender Bar*, his memoir of a heartbreaking, ultimately triumphant life steeped in the rhythms of a Long Island bar, Moehringer has done what I thought was impossible: He has taken another story essentially about fathers (his is mostly absent) and made it better than his first. In content and style, the man has found a new perfect, leaving the rest of us with only so much farther to go.

People Weekly 64.12 (Sept 19, 2005): p59.

CRITIC'S CHOICE

MEMOIR

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Moehringer was all but born in a bar, a literary-minded joint called Publicans in Manhasset, Long Island, N.Y.—the hard-drinking town that served as the setting for F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Moehringer deftly acknowledges his background's writerly connections, describing his journey—from fatherless urchin living in his grandfather's messy house to hard-drinking New York Times copyboy—with Dickensian grandeur and displaying good humor about his failures. (He thought his big break at the Times had come the day he smelled smoke and saw fire trucks outside Penn Station; he called the paper, then realized that it was a fire drill and that he was smelling a burning pretzel. Moehringer's editor later dubbed him "Mr. Salty.") But it's the author's loving depiction of the Publicans' crew that lies at the book's heart. Everyone from Bob the Cop, with his dark past, to Cager, a Vietnam vet who riffs eloquently about betting on horses ("The track's the only place where the windows clean the people!"), is respected as a father figure. The ultimate patriarch is the bar's owner, a bruising man with a brilliant smile, whose attempt to open a Publicans in Manhattan is spectacularly unsuccessful after the 1987 stock market crash. Moehringer's evocations of his multiple dads add up to a beautiful love letter home.

One for the Road; So this kid grows up in a bar—no joke, it's a great memoir. Malcolm Jones.

Newsweek (August 29, 2005): p74.

When book-sellers go to a convention, they apparently do spend the night reading. This past June, at BookExpo America in New York City, Hyperion Books started handing out prepublication copies of J. R. Moehringer's debut memoir, *The Tender Bar*, on a Friday. By Saturday morning, word of mouth had made Moehringer Topic A on the convention floor. No one who's read the book has stopped talking about it since: what conventioners were calling "the book about the kid growing up in a bar" is poised to be the fall's sleeper hit when it arrives in stores in September. Cynics may scoff, but they haven't read the book.

Moehringer, 40, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist for the *Los Angeles Times*, grew up in Manhasset, a small town on New York's Long Island. His dad, a disc jockey, was "a man of many talents," the son writes, "but his one true genius was disappearing." The kid spends most of the book searching for his father's voice on the radio dial. Raised by his mother, Moehringer was an only child and, by his own account, a needy kid. "I needed a family, a home and men. Especially men. I needed men as mentors, heroes, role models and as a kind of masculine counterweight to my mother, grandmother, aunt and five female cousins with whom I lived." He found



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Reviews: (continued)

the men he needed in Publicans, the local saloon where his uncle tended bar. From childhood through high school and college, they were his babysitters, his rides to the beach, his counselors and confessors. "They taught me how to hold a curveball, how to swing a nine iron, how to throw a spiral, how to play seven-card stud... They taught me how to stand and promised me that a man's posture was his philosophy." Later they taught him how to coin a well-turned phrase and how to appreciate a well-turned ankle. Ultimately, "they taught me to be confident. That was all. But that was enough. That, I later realized, was everything." Well, maybe not everything. They also taught him how to tell good stories. Quick proof? Go directly to page 137 for what is, quite possibly, the funniest sex scene anyone has ever written.

From childhood until well into adulthood, Moehringer was totally in love with Publicans—the good kind of "in love," where you really pay attention—and he makes his readers fall in love with it, too. When he takes up with a college girl who can't fathom his fascination with barflies or his obsession with this particular bar, all we can think is, what's a matter with her? At most bars, "people talk to justify drinking—at Publicans they drink to justify talking." The talk "could jump from horse racing to politics to fashion to astrology to baseball to historic love affairs, all in the span of one beer." Moehringer is just guessing about the one-beer part, because he never stayed for just one. And sure enough, in the final chapters comes the reckoning where he quits drinking, because this is not an age in which one may simply celebrate a gin mill and let it go at that. To his credit, Moehringer settles his account with no fuss. He's frankly—and there's something admirable in this—a little fuzzy about why he quit. Not every memoir should end with a neat lesson. And besides, this isn't a book about sobering up. It's about growing up. The genuine tension in the story lies in the distance between who young J. R. Moehringer was and who he wanted to be. As the distance shrinks, you'll want to cheer. But the cheer will die in your throat after you realize that once the gap has narrowed all the way, the story will be over. The only thing wrong with this terrific debut is that there has to be a closing time.

Moehringer, J. R. *The Tender Bar* Keir Graff.

Booklist 101.22 (August 2005): p1969(1).

People don't buy memoirs to read about happy families. And yet, for those who read a lot of memoirs, it can still be startling to learn both how many people have unhappy families—and how quickly we become inured to those people's pain. It's a rare writer who recollects his trials with clarity and dispassion, giving us not voyeurism but a good look at ourselves. Moehringer, raised poor by his melancholy mother, found himself looking for male role models wherever he could find them—often among the regulars at Publicans, a Manhasset, Long Island, bar that sounds a bit like Cheers with swearing. A Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, he recalls events as disparate as losing his virginity and getting his first newspaper job (at the *New York Times*) with a newsman's imperative to get the story. The reconstructed dialogue can be a bit cinematic, but that's a quibble. Funny, honest, and insightful, *The Tender Bar* finds universal themes in an unusual upbringing and declares a real love of barroom life without romanticizing it too much.



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Reviews: (continued)

The Tender Bar. Terry Golway.

Publishers Weekly 252.26 (June 27, 2005): p50(1).

You needn't be a writer to appreciate the romance of the corner tavern—or, for that matter, of the local dive in a suburban strip mall. But perhaps it does take a writer to explain the appeal of these places that ought to offend us on any number of levels—they often smell bad, the decor generally is best viewed through bloodshot eyes and, by night's end, they usually do not offer an uplifting vision of the human condition.

Ah, but what would we do without them, and what would we do without the companionship of fellow pilgrims whose journey through life requires the assistance of a drop or two?

J.R. Moehringer, a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, has written a memoir that explains it all, and then some. *The Tender Bar* is the story of a young man who knows his father only as "The Voice," of a single mother struggling to make a better life for her son, and of a riotously dysfunctional family from Long Island. But more than anything else, Moehringer's book is a homage to the culture of the local pub. That's where young J.R. seeks out the companionship of male role models in place of his absent father, where he receives an education that has served him well in his career and where, inevitably, he looks for love, bemoans its absence and mourns its loss.

Moehringer grew up in Manhasset, a place, he writes, that "believed in booze." At a young age, he became a regular—not a drinker, of course, for he was far too young. But while still tender of years, he was introduced to the culture, to the companionship and yes to the romance of it all. "Everyone has a holy place, a refuge, where their heart is purer, their mind clearer, where they feel close to God or love or truth or whatever it is they happen to worship," he writes. For young J.R., that place was a gin mill on Plandome Road where his Uncle Charlie was a bartender and a patron.

The Tender Bar's emotional climax comes after its native son has found success as a journalist for the *Los Angeles Times*. On September 11, 2001, almost 50 souls who lived and loved in Moehringer's home town of Manhasset were killed in the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. One was a bartender we've met along the way. Another was one of the author's cousins.

Moehringer drove from Denver, where he was based as a correspondent for the *Times*, to New York to mourn and comfort old friends. He describes his cousin's mother, Charlene Byrne, as she grieved: "Charlene was crying, the kind of crying I could tell would last for years."

And so it has, in Manhasset and so many other Long Island commuter towns. Moehringer's lovely evocation of an ordinary place filled with ordinary people gives dignity and meaning to those lost lives, and to his own.



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Alehouse Rock: In his luminous memoir *The Tender Bar*, J.R. Moehringer comes of age in a pub. Gregory Kirschling.

Entertainment Weekly 837 (Sept 2, 2005): p82.

J.R. Moehringer didn't have a father growing up; he had a bar. His old man, who got into a fistfight at his own wedding, threatened to slice up Moehringer's mother's face with a straight razor when the boy was 7 months old, and later left them altogether. As a kid, the author and his mom lived at his grandfather's derelict house in Manhasset, N.Y., 142 steps away from Dickens, the watering hole (later renamed Publicans) that serves as the focal point for Moehringer's outstanding memoir, *The Tender Bar*.

Moehringer is a Pulitzer-winning writer, now at the *Los Angeles Times*. In other words, he's yet another ace journalist who owes his greatest training to some old gin joint. But his tale is richer and more unusual than most. And it's not afflicted with some of the usual schmaltz that comes when writers romanticize a booze-filled past. (There's a little schmaltz, but it works.) As for the title, his bar is not "tender" in the sense that life at Publicans was soft or sentimental. It was tender, rather, in the more intimate sense that it tended to the fatherless young man like an especially sympathetic bartender, with its solid-oak bar top, its 40-foot wall of shiny bottles, and, most of all, its talk-addicted regulars exerting a riptide-like pull on Moehringer until he was 25.

The whole memoir is as sneakily effective as the subtle pun in its title, deeply felt where it might've turned cheap and easy. This isn't the boozy confession you might be expecting—not till late in the book does Moehringer start drinking too much, although he can be faulted slightly for not giving much space to the more unromantic aspects of bar life, such as, for starters, the hangover.

But when it comes to the romantic stuff, Moehringer is sometimes as vivid as any of the 4 gajillion writers who've already waxed eloquent on the barfly's life. His crew, led by his alopecia-afflicted, gambling-junkie Uncle Charlie, is a distinctive lot. And of his first visit to Publicans, he reports: "I saw that the air was actually a beautiful pale yellow, though I couldn't see any lamps or other possible sources of light. The air was the color of beer, and smelled of beer, and each breath tasted like beer—malted, foamy, thick."

Publicans—with its "scintillating talk, which could jump from horse racing to politics to fashion to astrology to baseball to historic love affairs, all in the span of one beer"—taught Moehringer how to tell stories. And the best thing about *The Tender Bar* is that it is many stories in one. If the boyhood or bar sections don't give you a buzz, something else will. When he romances a girl named Sidney with "almond-shaped brown eyes," the book is an achy tale of doomed first love. When he tries to reconnect with his father, a former New York City radio personality known as "The Voice," it's a hard-luck father-son story. When he lands improbably at Yale, it's a fondly rendered college memoir. When he arrives even more improbably as a copyboy at his beloved New York Times, it's the funny saga of a hapless cub reporter. And so on. Moehringer has hours and hours of stories that any bar hound worth his stool would bend both ears to drink in. Thankfully, the writer has opted to put them down on paper. A-



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Discussion Questions from BookBrowse:

Caution! It is likely that the following reading guide will reveal, or at least allude to, key plot details. Therefore, if you haven't yet read this book, but are planning on doing so, you may wish to proceed with caution to avoid spoiling your later enjoyment.

1. In the memoir, JR has a difficult childhood and family circumstances in many respects, but there are also many positive elements to his childhood, including a loving mother and grandmother. Compare Moehringer's portrait of childhood to other memoirs you've read.
2. There are various portrayals of "good" and "bad" men in the memoir. What are the different definitions of goodness in men?
3. Alcohol permeates the memoir. In what ways is it both a positive and a negative factor in the lives of the various characters?
4. JR's mother is deeply conflicted about her living circumstances. Do you think her experiences are representative of the struggles of many single mothers? Do you think she is a strong character? Did you admire her, or empathize with her?
5. JR's grandmother is tremendously long suffering, verbally abused by both her husband and her son, and forced to put up with her husband's stinginess and philandering. Did you find her a sympathetic character? Did her dilemma feel familiar to you?
6. JR's grandfather is terrible to his wife and children, and mostly terrible to his grandchildren. Yet he has occasional moments of greatness, such as at JR's school breakfast. What do you think motivated JR's grandfather? Did you find him likable?
7. JR and his mother spend a good bit of time during his childhood looking at other houses, and the ways that other people live. JR even peeks in livingroom windows. Consider the ways that such comparisons might be a positive or a negative influence.
8. JR grows up without a present father. How do you think his search for a masculine identity compares to that of men who grew up with fathers—good or bad—who were more present in their lives?
9. The men along the bar are depicted warts and all—did you consider them positive role models? Which of the men was most appealing to you, and why?
10. At various points in his young adulthood, JR notices that the men in the bar have conflicting attitudes toward success in other men. What does this stem from? Was it familiar to you?
11. Sports and athletes are tremendously important in the memoir, particularly among the men—athletes are admired and even deified, and games and matches are focal points of drama in the memoir and the experience of them can even become personal milestones. Consider the importance of sports in men's lives and relationships with each other.



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Discussion Questions: (continued)

12. Sidney is compared to Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*. In what other ways do characters and circumstances in *The Tender Bar* resemble that novel, particularly with respect to class and aspiration?
13. In what ways was JR's enormous ambition a positive element in his life, and in what ways was it the source of pain? Is this inevitable?
14. At the end, JR suggests that Sidney wasn't wrong to have wondered about a young man who spent so much time in a bar. Did you find her sympathetic?
15. How did you feel about the epilogue, and the way that the events of the epilogue tied together the themes of the memoir? Did you feel resolution? Did you think JR had changed? In what ways?
16. Did you see yourself and any of your own experiences as a parent, child, man or woman in the memoir?